

Fact Sheet

INFLUENZA: What You Need To Know

What is influenza?

Influenza, commonly called “the flu,” is a respiratory disease caused by a virus. Unlike many other viral respiratory infections, such as the common cold, influenza can cause severe illness and life-threatening complications in some people.

There are two main types of influenza virus: A and B. Each type includes many related viruses or strains, each slightly different from the others. Type A epidemics are generally more frequent and severe than type B.

How does influenza spread from one person to another?

Influenza viruses spread from person to person in respiratory droplets. When an infected individual coughs, sneezes, or talks, they propel these droplets into the air. They may be deposited on the mouth or nose of people nearby (generally within 3 feet) or onto surfaces that other people may touch.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Typically one to three days after exposure to the virus.

How serious is influenza?

Influenza symptoms range from very mild to severe, depending on such factors as the influenza strain involved and the person's susceptibility and general physical condition. Most people recover within a week, although they may continue to feel weak for several days.

However, influenza can last longer and cause life-threatening complications in high-risk individuals, such as the elderly, and in rare cases in normal, healthy individuals. More than 200,000 Americans are hospitalized with influenza-related complications each year, and, on average, about 36,000 die.

What are the symptoms of influenza?

Influenza symptoms include fever, chills, headache, extreme fatigue, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, and muscle aches. The risk of developing severe complications, such as pneumonia, and the risk of death increases with age (especially for people over 55). Individuals with chronic medical conditions (such as diabetes; heart, lung, or kidney disease; severe anemia; or chronic diseases that weaken the immune system) also are more susceptible.

When is the influenza season in the United States?

In the United States, the season generally runs from October through May, peaking anywhere from late December through March. The overall health impact of an influenza season can vary from year to year.

How do I know if I need urgent medical attention?

There are some warning signs that indicate you should seek urgent medical attention.

In children, these include:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough

- Fever with a rash

In adults, these signs include:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting

Seek medical care immediately (call your doctor or go to an emergency room) if you or someone you know is experiencing any of the signs above. When you arrive, tell the reception staff that you think you have influenza. You may be asked to wear a mask and/or sit in a separate area to protect others from getting sick.

How is influenza diagnosed and treated?

Usually the diagnosis is based on the appearance of classic signs and symptoms. Confirmation can be achieved in the lab by culturing throat specimens or detecting antibodies in a patient's blood sample. Certain drugs are available by prescription for the treatment and prevention of influenza. These may reduce the severity of the symptoms if therapy is started early in the course of the illness. The drugs may also be used to prevent someone from developing influenza after an exposure or during an outbreak. Otherwise, the recommended treatment is bed rest, drinking more than the usual amount of liquids, and taking pain relievers to help reduce discomfort. Children with influenza should not be treated with aspirin.

Why does there seem to be a new strain of influenza every year?

Influenza viruses change frequently, and so from time to time new strains of influenza virus appear. When this happens, epidemics can occur because people have not had previous exposure that would allow them to build immunity against the new strain.

How can I protect against influenza?

There is a vaccine to protect against influenza. Because the influenza virus changes from year to year, it is important to get vaccinated against influenza on a yearly basis. In addition, flu shots provide protection for only about a year.

Other ways to protect against influenza include washing your hands often with soap and warm water and not touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with your hands.

Is the vaccine safe?

The vaccine is very safe and effective and generally has few side effects. There may be some soreness, redness, or swelling where the shot is given. Other possible mild side effects include headache and low-grade fever for a day after the vaccination. However, in general the benefits of being vaccinated far outweigh the risks. You cannot get influenza from the vaccine.